

Anonymous Call Set Off Rumors Of Nuclear Arms for Vietnam

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 12—The rumor started with an anonymous phone call to a Congressional committee. Within a week the rumor had gone around the world and involved the President of the United States, the Prime Minister of Britain and leaders of Congress in a discussion over whether or not the United States was considering using tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam.

The Administration insists that no such step is being considered and brands the discussion as "irresponsible." But between politicians at home and abroad, the White House is having difficulty catching up with the rumor and squelching the discussion.

While the discussion may

have no basis in fact, it illustrates how rumors get going in this gossip capital and gain currency, particularly among those who are jittery or critical about the administration's policy.

It all began last Monday with an anonymous phone call to Carl Marcy, staff director of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The caller suggested the committee should look into why the Pentagon had sent Dr. Richard L. Garwin of Columbia University, who was described as "a tactical nuclear weapons expert," to South Vietnam.

A check by the Foreign Relations Committee staff with the staff of the Joint Congressional

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Committee on Atomic Energy turned up the information that the Garwin mission had nothing to do with nuclear weapons.

Through the press, which had been tipped off about the anonymous phone call, the rumor quickly found its way to the Pentagon. Answering inquiries, the Pentagon public information office on Tuesday morning issued a statement saying that Dr. Garwin and two other scientists had been sent to Vietnam to appraise "the effectiveness of new weapons," but that "the weapons have no relationship whatsoever to atomic or nuclear systems of any kind."

The statement, however, apparently did not find its way to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. At a closed meeting on Wednesday morning, the anonymous phone call was discussed. The subject might have been dropped there, but an unidentified Senator said he also had picked up rumors that the Administration was considering the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam, perhaps in the defense of Khesanh, if necessary to save the Marine Corps garrison there.

If any credence was given to the rumor it may have reflected the widespread uneasiness among the committee members, most of whom have been critical of Administration policy, about the recent adverse turn of military events in Vietnam.

Senator Joseph S. Clark, Democrat of Pennsylvania, apparently voiced the fears of many of his fellow committee members when he said yesterday in a television program that he was worried lest the Administration be tempted to use nuclear weapons if North Vietnamese forces gained the upper hand in the battle for Khesanh.

Dienbienphu Recalled

Some committee members recalled how in the battle for Dienbienphu in 1954, Adm. Arthur W. Radford, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had advocated using tactical nuclear arms to save the beleaguered French forces. He was overruled by President Eisenhower. The committee members were also aware that the question came up in a current if hypothetical context with Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a hearing before the

Senate Armed Services Committee on Feb. 1.

According to gossip around Senate cloak rooms, General Wheeler was asked a hypothetical question about the use of nuclear weapons at Khesanh. The general, according to Administration sources, replied that the military chiefs had had to consider all possibilities but had concluded that Khesanh could be held without using nuclear weapons.

According to Pentagon sources, no nuclear weapons have been stationed in South Vietnam, if only because of security problems in protecting the secret weapons. This does not exclude the possibility that some of the weapons may be stored off-shore, on aircraft carriers or on Navy attack cargo ships.

Tactical nuclear warheads, which have explosive yields ranging from a few hundred tons of TNT to tens of thousands of tons of TNT, are designed primarily for use against troops in the battlefield.

Strategic weapons, designed for use against cities or military installations, are generally much larger, with yields measured in hundreds of thousands or millions of tons of TNT. The distinction between tactical and strategic weapons, however, is not clear-cut. It depends largely upon the military circumstances in which a warhead is used.

Because of their compact size tactical warheads can be delivered by a variety of weapons, ranging from the Davy Crockett bazooka to large artillery howitzers, from fighter-bomber aircraft to Honest John rockets.

The Pueblo incident also influenced the foreign Relations Committee's attitude toward the rumor. The committee had learned that one reason American forces had not come to the assistance of the intelligence ship when she was seized by North Korea was that all United States planes in South Korea were equipped to handle only atomic weapons.

Rusk Is Questioned

This discovery prompted Senator J. W. Fulbright of Arkansas, the committee chairman, to ask Secretary of State Dean Rusk in a letter on Feb. 2 whether "the Administration believes we have the men and the equipment to handle another ground war or the mainland of Asia without

the use of nuclear weapons?"

As the discussion went around the committee table last Wednesday, one Republican member broke in to observe that the committee was engaging in "dangerous speculation" on the basis of just a rumor and to suggest that there could be damaging consequences if it ever got out that the committee was discussing such a rumor.

With that, the discussion was broken off and the matter left in the hands of Senator Fulbright as chairman. The following day, as a result of the discussion and the report on the Garwin mission. The Senator sent a letter to Secretary Rusk asking whether nuclear weapons were being introduced into South Vietnam.

There the matter probably would have rested in the obscurity of confidential communications if Bill McCarthy, a reporter from the Boston Herald, had not questioned Senator Eugene J. McCarthy Thursday afternoon at a hurried news conference at the Logan International Airport.

The reporter asked whether the Senator was concerned "that there will be a demand for the use of tactical nuclear weapons" if there was a repetition of recent military events in Vietnam.

The question, the reporter explained today, was prompted by the "hawkish" sentiment he had discerned in New Hampshire and not by any knowledge of the rumor. But the Senator's answer was undoubtedly influenced by his knowledge of the rumor racing around the Foreign Relations Committee.

Senator McCarthy replied that he "expected that there would be a demand for the use of tactical nuclear weapons by someone."

Then, after a pause, he said "as a matter of fact, there have been some demands for the use already."

The Senator's statement went largely unnoticed by the press the next morning. But then on Friday, the White House gave international circulation to the rumor about nuclear weapons. This came about when the White House press secretary, George Christian was asked about the Senator's statement and described it as "false," irresponsible, and "unfair to the armed services."